

"Year after year, Americans look forward to the end of winter and the beginning of spring - in all respects but one. As winter's cold diminishes, the price of fuel invariably rises. Past springtime spikes in oil and gas prices have led to \$4-per-gallon regular gasoline which easily sets the high mark for the year. Predictions for higher prices at the pump are never far off. And, as we have seen, those higher costs for fuel lead to higher transportation costs for consumer goods, services, and food.

In Southern Missouri, these threats also directly target our families, along with our livelihoods. We use a lot of transportation fuel to get from place to place, and we buy goods and services which also must travel long distances. A \$50 tank of gas may last ten days in the city, but in rural America, we fill up twice a week.

Even worse is the effect of the cost of gas on the bottom lines of employers. Especially in a difficult economic climate, rising costs of production are a major impediment to economic recovery.

So every spring threat of price spikes in transportation fuels also sparks a national discussion about promoting domestic resources, growing more alternative fuels at home, and integrating new energy sources into the framework of American transportation.

But then, as fuel prices settle, the conversation stalls. We stop talking about energy alternatives and the dangers of getting a significant portion of oil from the Middle East. Since the 1970's, this debate has started and stopped dozens of times.

2011 will serve as a lesson in global energy economics we have long ignored. Political unrest in the Middle East endangers global production of oil, strategic shipping routes, and stable oil prices on commodities markets. Iran and other nations which harbor ill will toward the United States see opportunity in the chaos. They are already trying to be disruptive. And the confusion in this oil-rich part of the world coincides with that annual surge in oil prices which already gives us pause year after year.

So if we are committed to energy solutions, and I have offered many in Congress, then we must get serious about finishing this discussion. We ought to set aside the international politics. We can even afford to forget about the partisan divide on these issues in the U.S. in favor of arriving at some solutions.

What might these be? First and most obviously, we can allow more exploration of domestic oil resources we know to be rich in oil and natural gas.

Next, we can create new incentives for creation, production and use of alternative fuels on which everyone can agree. It need not be expensive and it need not be overly complicated, but American businesses, producers and consumers deserve affordable fuel choices in a competitive marketplace.

Finally, we can look to the future. It's downright foolish to dismiss the state-of-the-art work product coming out of our nation's colleges and universities, including some right here in Missouri. They are making incredible discoveries in the energy field every year. Our youngest generation of scientists, entrepreneurs and researchers deserve a chance to test their energy ideas in the real world.

We don't have to lock down a new national energy policy in the next couple of weeks, but it is extremely important that we put some commonsense policies on the books - and soon. "